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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the status of Hispanic women in the United States and the challenges facing Hispanic women in society. The paper is divided into the following sections: (1) Introduction; (2) "From a Melting Pot to a Salad Bowl"; (3) "Adobe Walls and Glass Ceilings"; (4) "Signs of Improvement"; (5) "Diversity is 'In'"; (6) "The Need to Manage Diversity"; (7) "Unsolicited Advice for Hispanic Women"; and (8) "Where Do We Go From Here?" (EH)

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HISPANIC WOMEN: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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(HOUSTON, TEXAS - MARCH 22, 1997)

HISPANIC WOMEN: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Good morning - Buenos dias. I am delighted to be here.

A roomful of Hispanic sisters - and a few hermanos - what a great and inspiring sight!

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you during this international women's week.

I have been involved with women's issues and an advocate for women's rights for many years. I am not embarrassed to call myself a feminist.

During the past two decades, I have seen many positive changes regarding the roles of women in American society - especially the roles of women of color - and I thank God for them.

But you and I know that there is still much to be done before women achieve equity with men.

Women still do not receive the same salary as men for doing the same job and they are underrepresented in many professions, especially where the salaries are high. For example, only 14% of 3,000 college and university presidents are women or, to put it another way, the vast majority (86%) of all college and university presidents are men. In the corporate world, the statistics are even more depressing. Less than 5% of all corporate CEOs are women. You could probably count on one hand the number of Hispanic women CEOs.

Perhaps you saw an article in the *Houston Chronicle* the other day (3/19/97) about a study (published in the National Center for Health Statistics' current issue of Advance Data) that found that "white males rate happiest: and they're least likely to get depressed." We know why, don't we?

Please do not think I am against men or even against white men. I have been married to an Anglo man for 38 years and have three sons - all of whom I love dearly.

Still, facts are facts.

From a melting pot to a salad bowl

When I was growing up in New York City - a city of many races and immigrants - the goal was to make us all "mainstream Americans."

We were urged to minimize our differences - to speak English only, to dress like typical Americans, to adopt the behavior of the dominant culture, etc.

That was the melting pot theory.

It was not O.K. to be proud of our ethnicity or of the fact that we spoke a language other than English. The goal was to "fit" into a mold created by the dominant culture.

This was easier for some to do than for others.

In fact, it was traumatic for many.

As a result of their efforts to assimilate, many of my friends did not want to speak the language of their parents; they were ashamed of the food they ate at home and of other customs that distinguished them from mainstream Americans .

(Isn't it interesting how today ethnic foods are considered "gourmet?" A Mexican-American friend told me how he was embarrassed to eat the tacos or burritos his mother had prepared for lunch at school in Chicago when he was growing up. He would sit in a corner by himself so others wouldn't see what he was eating.)

Regarding the language: although this defies logic, when I was growing up, if you spoke only English you were considered better than if you spoke another language in addition to English. In other words, two was less (not more) than one.

A few succeeded in blending into mainstream America. And for some it was easy. Especially if they had light skin and their families went along with the changes.

But for others, it was difficult and gave rise to conflicts within families.

Adobe walls and glass ceilings

Even those who were committed to the task, were not always able to "pull it off." In spite of heroic efforts, they continued to be considered outsiders and continued to be treated differently than mainstream Americans.

Among these were:

Most Mexican Americans in the southwest
African Americans - everywhere
Asians on the west coast
Women, regardless of ethnicity or race

The aspirations of many capable women and men of diverse backgrounds - especially those of color - were blocked by "adobe" walls or glass ceilings.

The message was clear: unless you were male and white, your options in American society, were limited.

Sometimes the barriers were subtle, but they were ever present.

Signs of improvement

Without a doubt, the situation has improved in recent years.

Instead of a melting pot, Americans now desire our society to be viewed as one big and colorful salad bowl.

Distinct flavors are in. It is now O.K. to speak about our ethnicity and even to express pride in it.

However, the salad is expected to have a dressing that unites the distinct flavors. And that's fine. This is a big and great country and we need to find common ground so that we can all work and live together productively.

But we must be careful that the dressing that unites us does not totally mask our distinct flavors and we inadvertently become a melting pot again.

For example, we are told to:

- dress for success - (no bright colors, dangling earrings, etc.)

- speak English (this sometimes means no accent unless it is a "French" accent.)
- uphold common values. Sometimes conflicts arise between dominant cultural values and Hispanic cultural values, e.g. when one is expected to miss work to attend the funeral of an extended family member or to take care of a sick relative.

Too many of us still have to give up too much of who we are in order to "fit in."

Diversity is "in"

The good news is that there are signs that the salad bowl theory is being modified by requiring less dressing. There seems to be greater acceptance of diversity. In some circles, it is even viewed as desirable.

And you know why?

Enlightened self-interest.

Americans are acknowledging several realities:

1) demographic shifts indicate that in the not too distant future minorities will be the majority and they had better be in the workforce in sufficient numbers to support those who are retiring. It does not pay to keep us out or down.

2) there is strength in diversity. Our global economy and interconnectedness with other countries requires that we approach problem solving from different cultural perspectives.

(If General Motors had had one Spanish speaking person on their marketing team several years ago, they would have avoided a financial disaster when they tried to sell their Nova model in Latin America. That person would have told them that nova means "doesn't go" in Spanish.)

The other day *the Houston Chronicle* ran an ad for an industrial engineer :

Five years managerial experience,
At least one year work experience in another country,
Speaking knowledge of a second language desirable.

As corporations increase their international connections, they look for employees who are comfortable in, among and between diverse cultures.

3) companies are discovering the benefits of a team approach to problem solving.

Hispanics and Asians are good at team work -
Our cultures promote cooperation and collaboration.

In some ways, this is related to the role of the family in our cultures. Personal decisions often involve all family members.

(My mother has an opinion about every decision my husband and I make. She does not view this as an intrusion on our privacy, but as her responsibility to be involved in our daily lives. Sometimes I think that Hispanics invented shared governance.)

Because they are convinced of the benefits of diversity in the workplace, many corporations are actively recruiting minorities.

Some are being forced to, e.g. Texaco. Texaco doesn't know it yet, but it will be better for becoming more inclusive.

The need to manage diversity

In spite of undeniable evidence that the doors are opening wider for women and minorities, barriers to the full participation of many groups still exist. Not everyone is convinced that diversity is a good thing.

We must continue to reinforce the fact that there is strength in diversity and that what Hispanics and others bring to the team is important and needed in today's interconnected and changing world.

As an increasing number of people of diverse backgrounds enter the workforce, another issue surfaces which is often overlooked: The need to learn to manage a diverse workforce. How can individuals with different work styles, behaviors, and values work together effectively? How can we avoid conflicts and misunderstandings in the workplace?

This is a topic for another presentation. However, let me simply say that if we don't understand why some Asians do not always speak up in meetings, or why a young native American woman administrator may have a problem supervising someone who is older than she, or why an outstanding Hispanic employee quietly leaves an organization because she feels her hard work is

unrecognized, colleagues and supervisors may arrive at incorrect conclusions regarding the professional capabilities of these individuals.

We reap the benefits of diversity only when differences are acknowledged and dealt with in a climate of openness and trust.

We must learn to manage as well as promote diversity.

Unsolicited advice for Hispanic women

Because of the barriers that still confront our full participation in society, Hispanic women must learn to work around them.

How do we do that?

Here are a few suggestions:

1. We must set high goals for ourselves We must not limit our aspirations.

To paraphrase Robert Browning:

Ah, but a woman's reach must exceed her grasp or what's a heaven for?

The Bible tells us that without vision and dreams a people perish - Without vision and dreams Hispanic women will not progress.

This is where role models are important. If others can achieve those goals, why can't we?

2. We must prepare ourselves well.

Unfortunately, women and minorities must still be better prepared than the average white Anglo male to get as far.

There is still a perception that minorities are somehow not qualified.

We will know we have achieved equity when mediocre women and minorities get a raise - just like white Anglo males do now - and no-one objects.

The city of Houston boasts that it has had two African American chiefs of police- and that is great.

However, both these men have exceptional credentials.
Both have Ph.D.s and the current chief has a law degree as well.
I have no idea what the credentials of other chiefs of police are, but I would venture to guess that they fall short of these gentlemen.

In order to increase the number of Hispanic women who qualify for higher positions, those of us in supervisory positions, must encourage other women to get as many varied experiences as possible. I always tell women to volunteer for as many different projects as possible. These additional experiences enhance their resumes and increase their chances for higher level positions.

3) We must not let anything or anyone stop us from achieving our goals.

Several years ago, I read a wonderful book titled *oh, oh* by Robert Fulghum -

Fulghum stresses the importance of turning obstacles into opportunities. We must believe that each barrier we overcome makes us stronger. We must learn to go from "oh-oh" (how do I overcome this obstacle?) To "aha!" (I did it).

He warns against becoming victims of the Cinderella syndrome - like Cinderella, we assume the situation is beyond our control and accept our fate as inevitable. We just sit around and wait for a fairy godmother to come along.

Fulghum insists that Cinderella could have run away; she could have gone on strike. . . . She could have poisoned her step mother and step sisters (just kidding),

In real life, there are no fairy godmothers who will suddenly appear and solve our problems or open doors for us.

But there are many people out there willing to help us, if we would reach out to them.. God helps those who help themselves.

Cinderella really had no options. But women today do.

Resourceful women have always had some options.

I am sure that many of you have heard of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, a Mexican poet of the 17th century.

When she was a young girl, Sor Juana aspired to be a writer, but in her society women only had two options: to go into a convent or get married. Sor Juana

was brilliant but frustrated because she did not want to do either of those things - she wanted to be a writer. After giving it some thought, she opted for a life in the convent, reasoning that that would give her more freedom to write than would taking care of a husband and children.

The amazing thing about Sor Juana, however, was that she dared to admit the real reason why she chose to become a nun. Not surprisingly, she made quite a few men angry, including her boss - the Bishop of Puebla.

However, this did not stop her. She was convinced that men were the cause of many of the problems women faced, and said so.

Listen to this verse of one of her poems:

Hombres necios, que acusais
A la mujer sin razon
Sin ver que sois la ocasion
De lo mismo que culpais.

(English translation)
Stupid men, quick to condemn
Women wrongly for their flaws,
Never seeing you're the cause
Of all that you blame in them.

Sor Juana became one of Mexico's outstanding lyric poets and often the only woman included in anthologies of Mexican literature until the 20th century. She had few options, that's true, but she made the most of her life within the parameters imposed on her.

Sometimes *we are our own worse enemies*.

Many years ago, I dropped out of a doctoral program at Iowa State University to get married.

25 years later - my children were grown - I wanted to go back to school and get that Ph.D. I had been teaching at a community college in Puerto Rico and had worked my way through the administrative ranks to become CEO of my college, but my husband and I were talking about moving back to the States and I knew that I needed that doctoral degree to get another high-level administrative position.

Even so, I was embarrassed to voice my goal. I feared that if I did go back to school I would make a fool of myself.

I had never used a computer and I knew that computer literacy was a must in graduate schools. I was also afraid I would be the oldest student in the class and all eyes would be on me.

Finally, I wasn't sure we could live on one income (our youngest child was still in college although he was in his senior year).

Thank God I did not give in to my reservations. When I finally mentioned the possibility to my husband, he and the children were delighted. So I did it and survived.

More than that. I thrived. After that, the sky was the limit.

Let me share another personal angle to this phase of my life, which may help some of you as you set goals for your lives.

I was 54 years old when I received my Ph.D. I thought that if I was lucky - I would get one more senior level administrative position in a community college and then retire from that job.

This is what happened.

At 54, I accepted a position as vice president of a community college in Chicago; at age 60, I became president of San Antonio College in Texas; and at 64, I was offered the position I now hold - chancellor of the Houston Community College System. And I am still going strong.

(My sister, who is 18 months younger and also a chancellor, would be shocked if she heard me reveal my age in public.)

Sometimes it is our families and our culture that put obstacles in our paths.

This is particularly true of Hispanic women.

My mother has always been very supportive and proud of the achievements of her two daughters. Nevertheless, she was uncomfortable with the idea of my leaving my husband alone in Puerto Rico while I went to Florida to get my degree.

She also was not happy to learn that he gave up his job to follow me to Chicago when I got a job there, instead of allowing him to make a career move first and my following him. (My husband believed that since I had followed him to Puerto Rico, it was now his turn to follow me.)
A great book about how cultural barriers can hold Hispanic women back is *Chiquita's Cocoon*: by Bettina Flores - a grass roots Chicana from California.

She writes: "Our history, our language, our art, our music , our food, a lot of traditions - these are wonderful. But Hispanic women need to look at the aspects of our culture that are non-progressive and that are holding us down."

Aspects of our religion; women as martyrs - subservient to husbands and children.

A male dominated lifestyle - men should have the last word. Punto. We must not offend them, at all cost.

Several years ago a factory opened in San Antonio that hired almost 200 women, most of them Hispanic.

After the first pay period, a large group of these women came to the plant manager and demanded that they be paid less. The reason? Most of them were earning more than their husbands and this was creating serious problems for them at home.

They were earning just a notch above the minimum wage, which provided these women (most of whom had been unemployed) with an opportunity to get out of poverty. But cultural pressures prevailed over reason.

Many Hispanic men resent their wives or children getting a higher level education than they have. They fear they will lose face or power or respect.

It is not easy to confront negative aspects of our culture. But we must convince those who would keep us back, that improving the lot of Hispanic women will improve the lot of all Hispanics..

4) Hispanic women must support each other.

A recent study indicates that women and minorities manage a diverse workforce better than men do, but they do not hire and promote other women to the same degree. Once they get to the top, they hesitate to reach out to or associate with those who are not there yet.

If this is true, we must not let this continue.

We must mentor each other. *Mujeres Unidas* is the theme of this conference - it must become the driving force of your organization and that of all Hispanic women..

It is only when women support each other that all women are enhanced. I once heard a wise woman say that really smart women give their right hand to someone who knows more than they do and their left hand to someone who knows less - and together they move forward. Every woman's success makes it easier for others to succeed.

A critical mass of women in any job is needed for full acceptance into the world of men. Unfortunately, women and especially Hispanic women, are not even close to achieving a critical mass in many positions. Often we are the "first" and "only" Hispanic females to hold a certain position. That is not an enviable position - believe me.

My role as chancellor of a large urban community college system would be more difficult if I was the only woman or the only Hispanic chief executive in town. Fortunately, there are other women and other Hispanics in top decision-making positions in the Houston area.

Members of my faculty and staff may disagree with some of the decisions I am making (e.g. regarding the reorganization of the system), but they criticize the changes I am proposing, not me personally. And that is a significant breakthrough in the acceptance of women leaders.

5) Finally, support those who advocate the same values you do, even if they are white males, members of other ethnic and racial groups, or of different political parties.

Support those who are in favor of equity and women's rights and other related goals.

I am not a Republican, but I sent a letter to my state senator, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, congratulating her for her stand against sexual harassment in the US Navy Tailhook scandal.

Where do we go from here?

It was disconcerting to learn at the 1995 United Nations International Women's Conference in Beijing, that, at the end of the 20th century, in no country in the world have women achieved equity with men. Furthermore, that women are victims of discrimination - in one way or another - in every country of the world.

The Beijing conference called our attention to the compelling fact that the plight of women worldwide is linked to the prospects of all humanity and that improving the lot of women is critical to making this a better world for all of us.

Marie Curie (who won two Nobel prizes in chemistry) was asked on the occasion of receiving her second prize, why she continued to work so hard; she replied "because I do not dwell on what already has been achieved, but on what still needs to be done.

Well, Hispanic women have made great strides toward enjoying the same rights and opportunities as men, but much still needs to be done before we are accepted as equal partners in the social, economic, and political development of this great country.

About 60 years ago, Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset was invited to speak to a group of students at the University of Madrid. Spain had just gotten over a terrible civil war; the country was devastated; its future loomed bleak indeed.

But Ortega y Gasset told the young people before him: "You know, even in the best of circumstances, the future is never handed to us ready made. All we are given are possibilities. It is up to us to make the most of our possibilities."

Well, the future of Hispanic women looms much brighter than the future of those Spanish young people 60 years ago. But our future is not handed to us ready made. It is up to us to make the most of the possibilities before us.

Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with you today.